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ABSTRACT

The discussion guide explores the policy debate over immigration to the United States with regard to economic and quality of life concerns, environmental issues, and ethical considerations. The first article discusses the growing sentiments against immigration while using an historical account of U.S. immigration history and laws. While a consensus exists regarding the need to reduce illegal immigration, disagreement remains as to how many legal immigrants should be accepted. The economic issues revolve around the inconclusive data on the cost or benefit of immigrants and the competition for jobs between native-born citizens and immigrants. The quality of life issues explore the social and cultural concerns of communities and the opposing views of the concern for national character, identity, and political values versus the multicultural values of society. Population growth, the environment, and resource use provide further points to consider. Some basic facts give further information on legal and illegal immigration. Ten key values and concerns present common conflicts that underlie discussions and debates about immigration. Ideas regarding policy issues address current levels of immigration, and reducing both legal and illegal immigration. The discussion guide concludes with 12 questions for discussion. (CK)

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Public Talk Series

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November 1993

Immigrants, Your Community, and U.S. Immigration Policy

A growing backlash against immigration

America takes pride in being a land of immigrants. In comparison with other nations, we have welcomed a far greater number of people from outside our borders. Though there have been periodic waves of anti-immigrant sentiment, usually coinciding with difficult economic times, the American people have generally supported immigration in the belief that it makes our country unique and strong. "Immigrants built America" is a typical comment.

Now many Americans are becoming troubled about immigration. According to nationwide polls in the summer of 1993:

- 60% of Americans think that immigration is bad for the country;
- 62% agree that immigrants take the jobs of U.S. workers;
- 59% agree that "many immigrants wind up on welfare and raise taxes for Americans";
- more than 60% say that immigration should be decreased.

Anti-immigration sentiment is even stronger in the seven states in which more than three-quarters of all immigrants settle. In California, which absorbs more than one-third of all legal immigrants and about 40-50% of illegal immigrants, a powerful grassroots political movement is working to change U.S. immigration policy.

Some see the change in attitude as due to a combination of prejudice, misinformation, and high-profile events involving foreigners, such as Haitian immigrants with AIDS and the World Trade Center bombing. Others, however, believe that a slow economy, widespread job losses, and cuts in government services have led many Americans to conclude that competition from immigrants hurts their own financial situation and is especially negative in its impact on the poor and on minorities.

The current wave of immigration is unprecedented except for the decades of 1900-1920, when 14.5 million immigrants came to America. By comparison, between 1971 and 1990, 10.5 million legal immigrants and an estimated 3 million illegal immigrants arrived. (Recent immigrants, it should be noted, represent a much smaller percentage of our country's *total* population, which is three to four times as large as it was near the turn of the

century.) If the U.S. continues to absorb the same numbers of legal immigrants as in 1991 and 1992, more immigrants will come to the U.S. in the 1990s than in any previous decade.

The wave of immigration at the beginning of this century ended when Congress and President Harding passed a law that dramatically cut the number of immigrants, particularly those from the so-called "less desirable" countries of Eastern and Southern Europe. The quota system then adopted by the U.S. was abandoned in 1965. Since then there have been no laws to reduce legal immigration; in fact, the trend has been in the opposite direction. As recently as 1990, President Bush signed a law that increased legal immigration quotas by 40%.

In 1986, Congress did attempt to stem *illegal* immigration by passing the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), which granted amnesty to three million illegal aliens and barred employers from hiring undocumented immigrants. Virtually everyone agrees that IRCA has not worked well. This is partly because employer sanctions have been largely ineffective due to (1) the ease with which illegal immigrants can obtain counterfeit documents; (2) the willingness of some employers to risk hiring undocumented workers because they can pay them such low wages; and (3) the low risk of getting caught. Furthermore, IRCA has had an unintended consequence: some businesses have become hesitant to hire *legal* Asian and Latino immigrants, because of employers' unwillingness to deal with the paperwork and their fear that workers' papers will be forgeries.

The laws regulating *legal* immigration are complicated. Each year, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) issues visas in several categories that entitle people to come here as lawful, permanent residents. The President together with the Congress establish the numbers. Most legal immigrants are admitted under one of these categories: (1) "family reunification" – they are relatives of U.S. citizens or of permanent U.S. residents;

This Public Talk Series discussion guide is a resource for small-group, democratic, highly participatory discussions known as "study circles." The background information and discussion questions in this guide are supplemented by the how-to information in ***The Study Circle Handbook: A Manual for Study Circle Discussion Leaders, Organizers, and Participants***.

You are welcome to photocopy this publication, or you may order additional copies for $2.00 each. Discounts are available for large orders. If you have any questions or comments about this guide or would like additional information on study circles, please contact the Study Circles Resource Center, PO Box 203, 697A Pomfret Rd., Pomfret, Ct 06258. Phone: (203) 928-2616. FAX: (203) 928-3713.

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and improving the quality of public life in the United States.

(2) skilled workers, who can bring their families; (3) political refugees, who are granted asylum under U.S. law, or who are applying for asylum. It is not uncommon for people in the family reunification category to be on a waiting list for several years before they can reside in the U.S.

Each year illegal immigration adds another 20 to 30% to the number of immigrants. The INS, in charge of controlling illegal as well as legal immigration, is generally acknowledged to be underfunded and overburdened – and, many would say, ill-managed.

There is a consensus that the U.S. must regain control of its borders and reduce illegal immigration. When it comes to how many *legal* immigrants we should accept, however, there is intense disagreement.

Key issues in the public debate

The following key issues appear in the national public debate on immigration, but they are most starkly represented in communities that deal with the immigration question on a daily basis.

Economic issues

Many people who live in areas heavily settled by immigrants stress the financial burden on local and state budgets, which must carry most of the cost of medical care and other public services that immigrants receive. School systems in Los Angeles and other cities, for example, have been overwhelmed by immigrants. The result of these burdens, some say, is higher taxes, poorer education, and less government assistance for the needy who are already here.

The data about whether immigrants are a net economic cost or benefit are inconclusive. Over the years, almost all studies have concluded that immigrants pay as much or more in taxes than the cost of the services which government provides to them. However, a couple of recent studies have challenged this conclusion, arguing that recent immigrants are less educated, have fewer job skills, earn less, and are more likely to need government assistance than those who came before 1980.

The truth is, it's hard to know, partly because it depends on how we ask the question – for example, immigrants who may use more local services than they pay for when they first arrive may more than compensate for that over the long run. Also, accurate information – particularly about illegal immigrants – is hard to find. What is clear is that roughly two-thirds of the taxes immigrants pay go to the federal government, while most of the services they use are supplied by local and state governments. Many recent immigrants are poor, and like most poor people they tend to pay less in property and sales taxes and more in employment and income taxes. Another important factor is that the federal government, which once funded programs to help states resettle immigrants, has cut such programs over the past decade.

Another major economic concern is competition for jobs. Supporters of reduced immigration argue that our economy is not creating enough new jobs for the workers we already have, much less for all the new immigrants. They argue that though immigrants are taking jobs that native-born Americans are unwilling to do, the fact that immigrants will take these jobs and that they form a large pool of unskilled workers in some areas is depressing wages for low-skill jobs. They go on to argue that that is what keeps those jobs unattractive for native-born Americans with higher wage expectations.

Others say the argument that immigrants pose a financial burden is an exaggerated one. They say that immigrants help communities and provide a boost to our sagging economy – by creating new businesses and jobs, doing work that native-born Americans will not do, working hard for low wages, paying taxes on their wages, and reviving run-down neighborhoods. In fact, they argue, immigrants – both illegal and legal – use few services. Illegal immigrants use few services because they are trying to avoid the authorities. Some legal immigrants hesitate to seek out and accept services because they fear that it will hurt their chances of becoming a citizen, feel intimidated, or are simply afraid of government authorities.

Quality-of-life issues

In some communities, social and cultural concerns about immigration are those most loudly voiced. Immigrants tend to live close together, changing neighborhoods dramatically. Some Americans are disturbed by the different cultures and traditions of newcomers, especially those from Latin American and Asian cultures. Some resent the fact that immigrants want to use their own language and don't learn English, or don't learn it quickly. Some allege that immigrants have contributed to a breakdown in social order and to increasing crime rates. They say that immigrants hurt communities because they crowd several families into one home, are noisy and dirty, and hang out on the street.

These Americans fear that the national character, identity, and political values of the U.S. will change for the worse as the population becomes less European. They say that immigrants create social friction and may slowly erode the English-speaking, hybrid European culture we call "American." They argue that the America of 1993 is vastly different from the America of 1900-1920 – there is less space for people, and the economy

Some Basic Facts About Immigration

How many immigrants are coming to the U.S.? Currently, total immigration is estimated to be about 1.1 million a year. About 700,000 legal immigrants come under policies for family reunification or skilled workers. Approximately 100-200,000 more legal refugees come because they are classified as "political refugees" or because they want that classification - that is, they are seeking asylum from political persecution. The annual net influx of illegal immigrants is thought to be 200-300,000.

Where do they come from? The origin of refugees to the U.S. has changed radically in the past decade. In the 1950s, 66% of all legal immigrants came from Europe and Canada. In the 1960s, that figure was 46%. In the 1980s, only 14% came from Europe and Canada, while 44% came from Asia, and 40% from Latin America. Today, 80% of immigrants are people of color.

What portion of the U.S. is foreign-born? About 1 in 12 U.S. residents is foreign-born, up from 1 in 20 in 1970, but far less than the 1 in 7 for the years from 1860 to 1920.

Where in the U.S. do most immigrants live? In recent years, more than three-quarters of legal immigrants have settled in just seven states: 40% of immigrants have settled in California, 12% in Texas, 10% in New York, 8% in Florida, 4% in Illinois, 3% in New Jersey, and 2% in Arizona.

Some Facts About Illegal Immigration

How many immigrants are in this country illegally? There is disagreement about how many of the total number of immigrants in the U.S.(approximately 20 million) are illegal. Figures range from 3.2 million to 4.8 million, or 16-24 percent. Each year there are 2-3 million illegal entries into the U.S., but many of these people return to their country of origin. The number of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. is thought to increase by about 200,000 to 300,000 each year.

How do illegal immigrants get here? More than half of new illegal immigrants each year enter as visitors - students or tourists - and *become* illegal only when they overstay their visas. Most of the rest enter the U.S. by crossing the border from Mexico.

Where do illegal immigrants come from? The top 10 countries of origin for illegal immigrants are Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, Canada, Poland, the Philippines, Haiti, Nicaragua, Columbia, and the Bahamas.

To what services are illegal immigrants entitled? In 1982 the Supreme Court ruled that all children, regardless of immigration status, are entitled to free public education. Illegal immigrants are not legally entitled to receive welfare, Social Security, or other government benefits, except for emergency medical services and education for their children. However, their children who are born in the U.S. are citizens.

isn't growing in the same way. Today there is less need for entry-level workers, and we are less able to absorb people into our economy – and, therefore, our culture. Others add that periods of low immigration in our history may always have been vital to the assimilation process, and that perhaps we need one of those low periods now.

Other Americans believe that opposition to immigration is based on prejudice against people who are different and especially against people of color, who make up a large proportion of the current wave of immigrants. They point out that most immigrants are hard-working, family-oriented, traditional people, many of whom have taken enormous risks and given up a great deal to come to the "land of opportunity." The last thing most immigrants want is a government handout. There are no statistics to indicate that immigrants are more likely to commit crimes than native-born Americans, they say. Newcomers bring vitality and diversity that strengthen and renew our communities and our nation.

Supporters of immigration believe that the increasing multicultural nature of our society is a big plus. Our society has gone through numerous transitions, and what it means to be an American has constantly changed, they claim. The same prejudices that people currently express against Asians and Latinos were expressed against German, Irish, Italian, Jewish, and Polish immigrants from Europe a century ago. They point out that the U.S. has been able to assimilate people who came from dramatically different cultures and political systems in the past.

Other issues

Population growth, the environment, and resource use. Some people don't mind increasing our population. They believe the U.S. has more space and resources and better

environmental controls than do the poor, crowded nations from which immigrants come. Others feel that, at the current rate of growth of 2.7 million people per year, the U.S. population is already growing too fast. This country is already too crowded, they say, and the land has a limited carrying capacity. Americans may not like the idea of limits, but it's time to accept some. Since population growth over the next 50 years will be mostly due to immigrants and their children, we should reduce immigration. By taking so many immigrants we worsen the world environment, they add, because the newcomers use more resources here than they would at home.

Political asylum. Debates about which political refugees should be allowed to enter the U.S. continue. How do we allocate the roughly 125,000 U.S. visas among millions of political refugees? Are Haitian boat people economic refugees fleeing poverty, or political refugees who should be granted asylum? What about Chinese? Cubans? Currently there is a backlog of 300,000 people who are waiting in the U.S. to have their asylum cases heard. Some of them will simply fail to show up for their hearings, disappear into this vast country, and become illegal immigrants.

Our moral obligation to help people in other nations. What obligation, if any, does the U.S. have to help poor and oppressed people in the world? How do we go about fulfilling this obligation? Do we still have this obligation if other wealthy countries don't do their share? Should we continue to accept more immigrants than do all other countries combined? Should we focus more on assisting the poor and oppressed in their homelands and try to diminish the pressure for immigration? What if this means spending a lot more money to help other countries develop their economies?

Key values and concerns

Below are some of the most common conflicts among values and concerns that underlie discussions and debates about immigration. In many cases, these conflicts frequently exist within an individual's thinking as well as among people.

1. The desire to welcome strangers who have been poor and oppressed and give them a better chance, but not wanting to pay more taxes and make one's own life more insecure financially.

2. Valuing and admiring the hard work, courage, and persistence of many immigrants, but fearing them as competitors in business, for jobs, and for public services.

3. The desire to maintain the cultural integrity, comfort, and familiarity of one's neighborhood vs. valuing a more diverse neighborhood with the richness and excitement of people from different cultures.

4. The desire to welcome strangers, yet the fear that people who are different may not return that welcome by respecting (or giving deference to) one's own culture and traditions.

5. The belief that it is important to provide the best education for every American-

born child vs. the belief that we should educate all the children in the community.

6. The belief that children benefit from going to school with people who have a common cultural background vs. the belief that children need to learn alongside people from different cultures.

7. The concern that large numbers of immigrants with no experience with democracy will undermine our political culture, vs. the belief that newcomers will add vitality to our public life.

8. Wanting to maintain an "open door" to the poor and oppressed of the world vs. concern about the natural limits of our land.

9. For newcomers, the desire to assimilate and "belong" to the dominant culture vs. the wish to value and maintain one's distinct cultural identity and heritage.

10. For newcomers, the desire to "fit in" vs. the wish to have one's cultural experiences validated and valued by the dominant culture.

The policy debate

Some Americans support current U.S. immigration policy, although they want to reduce illegal immigration. They feel that the current level of legal immigration – about 1 million a year, or 0.4 percent of our population of 250 million – is not only justifiable on moral grounds, but economically, culturally, and politically beneficial. The following policies, many argue, will make ***current levels of legal immigration*** more workable and therefore more acceptable:

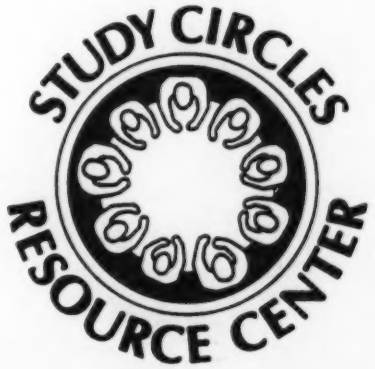
- Return some federal tax money to the local areas that are bearing the greatest burden of resettling newcomers.
- Enforce existing labor laws to reduce exploitation of immigrants and, thereby, help American-born workers.

Many Americans, however, are troubled by current levels of immigration. The following proposals have been made by those who want to ***reduce legal immigration***:

- Impose a three-year moratorium on legal immigration, followed by a cap on legal immigration at 300,000 a year;
- Amend the Constitution so that babies born in the U.S. to illegal immigrants do not automatically become citizens;
- Allow naturalized American citizens to bring only members of their immediate family – and not *extended* family – to the U.S.;
- Stop admitting so many legal immigrants from countries that don't share our Western cultural heritage.

People who hold a variety of beliefs regarding legal immigration have stated a desire to ***reduce illegal immigration***. There are a range of proposals to address this goal:

- Deny illegal immigrants access to basic public services such as free public education and health care;
- Strengthen the INS and particularly its patrols on the Mexican border so that it can catch and deport more illegal immigrants;
- Give every citizen and legal resident a national identity card that would be impossible to forge.



Questions for discussion

1. From where, how, and when did you or your ancestors come to America? Tell us the story of how your people got here.

2. What was it like for you or for immigrants you know to come to the U.S.? How have you or they been treated here?

3. What have you learned about immigrants who are from a different cultural background than your own?

4. What kind of a welcome for newcomers does your town or city offer? How do you feel about this?

5. How is the issue of immigrants/newcomers playing out in your community? Are there any tensions, and if so, where do they focus? On the schools? In neighborhoods? In a church? Around economic issues such as jobs, taxes, and social services?

6. To what social services should illegal immigrants and/or their children be entitled? Free public education? Subsidized medical care if they are poor? Welfare? Social security?

7. Some people think that anti-immigrant sentiment is based on prejudice. Others say that a person can welcome and be friendly with individual immigrants while opposing the policy that lets so many foreigners settle in the U.S. What do you think?

8. Some have noted that it is often the previous generation of immigrants who are most hostile to newcomers, that perhaps they are just "doing unto others as was done unto them." Do you think this is true? Why or why not?

9. What are the most important concerns or values that underlie your views on immigration? What do you think is most important to people who have different ideas from yourself?

10. Are there any common values that unite all or most members of your study circle, despite their different views about the issue?

11. What do you think of the policy proposals described briefly in this discussion guide? Try to make the best possible argument for the proposals with which you disagree. How does that influence your thinking, if at all?

12. What do you think our immigration policy should be? With what approach, if any, would most of your study circle agree?